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Ma Baozhong: Creating a Visual Theater of Power

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Ma Baozhong (born 1965, Heilongjiang Province) is a Chinese artist working in the post-socialist environment of Beijing. Educated at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, he chose to learn his craft as a realist painter by examining the practices of western master painters from Michaelangelo to Warhol. In his paintings, one finds traces of these artists as well as German artists Albrecht Durer, Caspar David Friedrich, Otto Dix, the Austrian Egon Schiele and the English artist Lucian Freud. From these sources he draws fine draftsmanship, expression, atmosphere, and the ability to give life to the figures and environments created on his canvases.

Although firmly grounded in the tradition of realism, Ma Baozhong's realism is not about copying what exists outside of art. Even when he draws upon photographs of his subjects as in the portraits of Chinese officials, his paintings are intended to offer a point of view in interpreting the subjects. He uses all of the past art and current influences from other artists and from the medium of photography to create his own voice as a painter. The result is a style that brings its own originality to its subjects.

His decision to paint in a western based style instead of following in the tradition of Chinese brush painting sets him apart from fellow artists who first grounded their work in Chinese art before experimenting with western pop art or abstract expressionist art styles. According to the artist, his decision to follow western art means was influenced by globalization of the art market and a perception that the future would favor art based on the art practices of a dominant western culture. This decision allowed him to

set aside grappling with the question that many Chinese contemporary artists struggle with: how to connect traditional Chinese art with contemporary practices art practices influenced by western culture.

Despite his doubts about the value of traditional Chinese art for his work as a twenty-first century artist, Ma Baozhong is decidedly Chinese in his world view and his outlook on the social and political issues facing persons living in the contemporary world. He proudly identifies with the values and aims of his national culture. This characteristic is reflected in his subjects, which include Chinese military personnel and political leaders as well as ordinary citizens. At the same time, his interests extend to world-wide geopolitical concerns.

Among the major narrative themes present in these paintings is power. What does this mean? Power refers to the ability of individual leaders and institutions to shape the lives of a people and steer the course of major developments economic, political, and cultural within national boundaries and across the global world. Political and military power are the obvious targets in Ma Baozhong's works. Featured in his paintings are many larger than life portraits of contemporary Chinese leaders and a few other world political figures. Chairman Mao, Premier Cho En Lai, Peng-Zhen, mayor of Beijing, army General Helong and other prominent party officials appear in his latest works. There are also images of Western leaders including Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

The sources for these images are themselves historical documents including official publications and newspaper accounts of important gatherings. If there are already

images documenting the events, why is it necessary to reconstruct the images? The artist's answer would be that he transforms images from newspapers and historical documentaries into paintings to express his own ideas. The paintings are intended to offer a fresh point of view on the persons and events through their construction using complex forms and colors used in the manner of Chinese folk painters. They offer a visual narrative that is neither ideological nor cynical. The national leaders are portrayed in a manner that implicitly acknowledges their role as executors of power. There is no explicit effort on the part of the artist to pass judgment on their successes or failures. Rather, the paintings ostensibly at least show the figures as human beings dutifully acting out their designated roles in public ceremonies. Nevertheless, their decisions will shape the course of history in their time.

Among the notable paintings in this mode is the painting "19 December, 1984," 1997. The painting depicts the signing of Sino-British joint declaration handing Hong Kong over to China on December 19, 1984 at the West Hall of the Great Hall in Beijing. (This painting was auctioned at Sothebys in Hong Kong in a collection of unification art to celebrate the tenth anniversary, 1997 to 2007, of the transfer of Hong Kong from Britain to China.)

Notwithstanding their roles in exercising power in the real world, in Ma Baozhong's paintings, these powerful political leaders, become characters as in a theatrical drama. The paintings fictionalize their roles as political leaders, and in doing so diffuse their power. Ma Baozhong's paintings are thus fictionalized theatrical narratives, as noted by the critic Peng Feng. Their aim is to tell the stories of the leaders of China in a form that humanizes the brutality that can

result when the exercise of power is not in harmony with the greater good of the people.

Especially interesting in this respect are the artist's earlier portraits are four "headshots" of Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Bin Laden, and Che Guevara created in 2000. These portraits executed in oil on canvas show their subjects as super star cultural heroes. With a debt to Warhol's portraits of western entertainment figures, the portraits of Mao and Lin especially are like theatrical masks. Yet they are not without interest for their psychological profiling of their respective subjects.

There is in Ma Bo's personal life a curious fascination for the military and for the instruments of war including weapons and military aircraft. It is not surprising thus to find that military power also has a strong presence in his paintings. In some of his works an entire painting is devoted to a display of soldiers as in "Volunteer Army Headquarters," 1991. In other paintings, a military presence takes shape in the background of a non-military gathering in a painting. For example, "An Event," 1995, depicts armed soldiers with tanks in the background of a gathering of people. Another approach to the subject, shows fighter jet filling the skies above the portraits of female and male figures in "Stroke Series," 2000 and also in "Gorazade," 1995.

In his works portraying the military, Ma Bao revisits the theme of earlier western artists' responses to war. His works on this theme evoke remembrances of Goya's "Disasters of War," Picasso's "Guernica," and the battle scenes of Otto Dix responding to the social climate in Europe. Like the contemporary American Jane Hammond's "Fallen," a memorial installation composed of leaves begun in 2004 and dedicated to young lives lost in Iraq, his paintings



拉登，你在哪里？
布面油画

Ladeng, where are you?
Oil on Canvas
180cm x 200cm
2001



拉登，我想你
布面油画

Ladeng, I Miss You
Oil on Canvas
180cm x 180cm
2001

showing the military presence in contemporary society, cannot help but remind us of the unsettling effects of war and violence on the human condition.

Weapons play an important part in the imagery of Ma Baozhong's paintings. There are logical and practical connections between the artist's representations of power and weapons. When the military is not directly present in the pictures, weaponry may still function as a symbol of power. Weapons are one of the means of exercising military power.

On a personal level, the artist is fascinated by the material properties of weapons as objects with beautiful shapes and forms. Yet he seems more concerned with their societal purposes. Through his focus on weapons, he aims to disclose their meaning and role in the context of society. "My interest in weapons may come from the interest in [the] human itself. The weapons in my paintings... are supposed to serve the purpose of representing the humans." Weapons accompanying figurative images assume this function in the series of portraits called "Series AK47," 1998. In these works, the weapons become a part of the identity of the subjects. Perhaps weapons bring comfort to human beings caught in a world of change and uncertainties full of circumstances over which they have no control. In any event they are an integral part of the portraits in this series.

As an artist concerned about the future of civilization and the human condition, Ma Baozhong is aware of the existence of other forces that shape the meaning of human life, apart from political and military power. For the most part, the people portrayed in his paintings show signs of

tension and uneasiness. They are not happy, even those who have the power; the artist is not happy. Throughout, there is a sense of an insecure world where so many things are changing. Their destiny is in the hands of others.

Culture, which includes manifestations of human creativity as expressed through the fine and popular arts, diversity in ideas and life styles, fashion, even manifestations of sexuality, constitutes an important component of happiness and fulfillment for human beings. Despite the dominant theme of people under duress in these paintings, there are moments when these other cultural forces surface. If only at the most basic human level, there are in the paintings overt and covert manifestations of sexuality in the portrayal of male and female representations of the human body, as in such works as "Target in Hawaii," 1999; "Backstage," 2006 and the sketches referred to as "rough." Depictions of women eying a man and men eying each other with sensuous intentions, bare breasted and scantily clothed female figures signal these basic human interests.

In his decision to become an artist instead of a soldier, Ma Baozhong affirms that art itself is a form of cultural power. The power of art may serve primarily market interest of the economy, or, more importantly, it can function in other ways to be beneficial to the human spirit. The artist's power can be used to affirm, or to question when necessary, the directions taken in the exercise of other forms of power. When aimed at the search for knowledge and understanding benefitting to the good of the people, the artist's voice is an essential part of a well formed society. At times, Ma Baozhong may express doubts about his decision to become an artist as when he says, "If I were to choose once again, I would probably choose to be a soldier." But not really.